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Chaplains join crews to take welfare services to sea



How do seafarers react to having sailing chaplains aboard their ships? Dr Erol Kahveci of the

Seafarers' International Research Centre finds some positive results.

In terms of global distribution and density of services, Christian-based organisations, commonly known as maritime missions, are still the most important welfare service providers for seafarers. Mission personnel have traditionally been able to rely on the flexibility of ships' working routines and a sufficiently lengthy port stay to establish relationships of trust with seafarers in need of personal advice and support. However, reduction in crew levels and fast turnaround times have placed increasing pressure on individual seafarers and on shipboard social life. Port turnaround times are so fast in some trades that seafarers have little chance to unburden themselves to trained listeners provided by seafarers' missions and other welfare organisations.

Developments in shipping suggest that sailing chaplains and outreach schemes are highly relevant to modern circumstances. The ITF Seafarers' Trust commissioned the Seafarers' International Research Centre (SIRC) at Cardiff University to evaluate the effectiveness of sailing chaplains and similar schemes aimed at providing shipboard welfare services for seafarers. The two and a half year

project commenced in January 2000 and was completed in August 2002.

Three maritime ministries agreed to take part in the resulting Sailing Chaplains Project – the Finnish Seamen's Mission (SMK), the German Seamen's Mission (DSM), and the Apostleship of the Sea (AoS) Philippines. In total, these maritime ministries provided seven full-time and over 20 part-time sailing chaplains with the majority being lay people. However, without any exception they were trained counsellors. Each time, they sailed for between one and four weeks depending on the voyage cycle of the ship. The ships they were on board varied by type and crew composition, but they mainly sailed with multinational crews. The challenge for the majority of the chaplains was to

establish a bond with seafarers from a variety of national, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Chaplains from the schemes emphasise their roles as professional listeners, conversation partners and "trusted friends" to seafarers. Chaplains are expected to share in the everyday experience and work of seafarers. In this way, the chaplain is meant to contribute directly to the life of the vessel, establish closer links with crew members and develop a firm basis for trust, respect and mutual understanding. Confidentiality, the neutrality of the outsider and a non-judgmental attitude are strongly emphasised by chaplains from all maritime missions. Similarly, chaplains from these schemes

emphasised the essentially secular way in which they sought to make their welfare services available to seafarers. The common philosophy espoused was that of being there for all members of the crew irrespective of distinctions of rank, religion, sex or nationality etc.

Shipboard interviews and a written questionnaire provided the principal means to assess seafarer attitudes towards the sailing chaplain schemes. Valid questionnaire responses were received from 370 crew members working aboard 36 of the vessels. The crew questionnaire was produced in five different languages (English, Finnish, German, Swedish and Tagalog).

When the respondents were asked their opinion on what the

role was of the sailing chaplain onboard their vessel, the majority of them expressed positive views about sailing chaplains. Here are some examples:

"Chaplains provide good advice, provide guidance and act as a mediator when we are at sea and lonely."

"A great help in providing advice about our problems. He also helps in the work onboard. We are short of crew. The chaplain is with us including fun time, most especially in our spiritual time."

"You can talk to him about things that are troubling you if, for example, you feel that you can't talk about these things with your fellow workers."

On board many ships today seafarers are assembled from

different cultural and religious backgrounds, therefore ships are usually multi-faith environments. In this context it was important to examine whether the chaplain's religious status helps or hinders the service provided to seafarers onboard. Only three per cent of the seafarers said that chaplains' religious status hinders their services. In fact the majority of the respondents said that it helps. Here are their reasons for this:

"Because a religious status brings reliability, therefore it is easier to discuss troubles with such a person."

"Helps. If a person goes to a psychologist, people might think he/she is sick. People see pastors at funerals, weddings, baptism and so on. It feels more natural. It is one of the pastor's roles in society to talk to people."

Some also said that the religious background of the chaplain has no effect on the services that they provide:

"It is not important whether the chaplain's religion is the same or different as mine; what is important is that he is a genuine human being."

"Whatever his religion is fine with me, as long as it is easy to relate to him, and it is not difficult to ask him questions, or request his assistance whenever I have a problem."

"The chaplain is not here to propagate his religion."

The substantial majority – 66 per cent – of the respondents would like to have a sailing chaplain on their vessel in the future again. Only six per cent responded negatively. Here are some of the reasons why the

seafarers would like to see sailing chaplains aboard their vessels again:

"The visit of an outsider to a closed community brings change to the everyday life. And anybody who wants may talk confidentially with the chaplain."

"Someone has to come here every once in a while so we can talk to a normal person. Hearing the same chat over and over again is so depressing to the men."

The main conclusion of the project is that it is apparent from the research findings that sailing chaplains and similar schemes provide personal services of quality to seafarers which cannot be delivered from shore based maritime ministries and welfare agencies.

The main research findings demonstrate that there is considerable demand among seafarers on all types of vessels for shipboard welfare services of the kind provided by sailing chaplains. The activities of sailing chaplains are also welcomed by companies, other secular service providers and seafarer interest organisations. Although only a small number of shipping companies include a sailing welfare worker scheme in their management quality systems, it is strongly argued by an operations manager of a major Finnish shipping company that when it is included it has a positive impact on productivity and helps to reduce industrial injuries and stress at sea.

As a result of their positive response to the experimental scheme seafarers could see more sailing chaplains on board their vessels in the near future.



BEN Tilman, a Finnish Seamen's Mission sailing chaplain, gets to work on board ship.



A FILIPINO seafarer with Jorg Pfautsch (right), one of the sailing chaplains from the German Seaman's Mission